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**Learning to teach online or learning to become an online teacher: an exploration of teachers' experiences in a blended learning course**

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**Abstract**

A key role in the successful implementation of any learning approach is played by teachers, so how well blended learning works will depend largely on how well teachers make the transition from their traditional face-to-face classroom roles to the wider more complex role that blended learning requires. The additional skills and the forging of a new professional identity might not come naturally to all practitioners.

This paper evaluates the impact that the introduction of blended learning in a distance language learning course has had on teachers. It presents and discusses findings from a small-scale evaluation study which compared quantitative and qualitative data gathered through a survey and a small number of interviews with participant observations from the researcher and the institutional end-of-course debriefing report.

The paper argues that whilst technological challenges and the sheer amount of change that teachers were faced with were largely responsible for some of the negative attitudes reflected in teachers' opinions about the course, a less obvious, broader explanation for the difficulties that teachers encountered might be found in the way that learning, teaching and training are conceptualised by both teachers and the institution.

It is proposed that a transmission of knowledge approach to training fails to acknowledge and properly support the transformation to teachers' identity that results from moving from traditional classroom-based teaching to online teaching. The shift goes beyond the acquisition of ICT skills and requires a pedagogical understanding of the affordances of the new medium and an acceptance by the teacher of his or her new role and identity.

**Keywords:** teacher training, teacher identity, online teaching, blended learning

## **Introduction**

As the evidence for the effectiveness of blended approaches to language learning mounts (Bañados, 2006; Scida & Saury, 2006; Murday, Ushida & Chenoweth, 2008), more and more institutions embrace this approach to language teaching. There is therefore a need to understand how teachers engage with online teaching and learning and how their roles and identities as online language teachers are redefined in the process.

The success of any innovation in education, such as the introduction of online teaching and online technologies (what is commonly referred to as e-learning), is in great part due to how well teachers engage with the new ideas and implement them with their learners. After all, teachers are often viewed by learners as the embodiment of the course and the institution, one of the key components which can make or break their whole learning experience (Freeman, 1997); thus the online teacher becomes ‘a critical factor in learner acceptance of e-learning’ (McPherson & Nunes, 2004).

The distinctive role of online teachers (referred to in the literature variously as tutors, moderators or facilitators) and the new pedagogies and skills that they need to develop to become effective in the online medium have been established for some time (Salmon, 2003; McPherson & Nunes, 2004). In the specific area of language teaching some researchers have worked to identify the particular skills that online language teachers require (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Shelley, White, Baumann & Murphy, 2006), and other work has focused on teachers’ own experiences and perspectives on their readiness and

willingness to engage with new technologies in the language classroom (Kessler, 2007; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Murday et al., 2008; Wiebe & Kabata, 2010).

This paper starts with a review of the literature on how teachers engage with online language teaching, followed by an evaluation of how online tuition was introduced alongside face-to-face teaching in a language distance learning course, focusing on the teachers' own perspectives and experiences of the process. The author explores the themes that emerged from a survey and a small number of interviews, and attempts to make sense of the partial success of their online experience by examining: first, how teachers' values, identity and notion of self impact on their engagement with the learning that is required as part of their new roles (Kubanyiova, 2009; White & Ding, 2009); and second, how the conceptualisation of learning and the strength of the various metaphors of learning as discussed by Hager & Hodgkinson (2009) affect training, particularly in the workplace and in relation to the role of the individual in the learning process (Billet, 2001; Billet & Somerville, 2004).

## **1. Literature review**

### **1.1 Impact on teachers of new online technologies for teaching and learning**

Much of the value of new technologies such as computer mediated communication (CMC) and Web 2.0 tools resides in the increased opportunities for interaction and communication they afford to language learners, allowing them to experience a wider

range of views (Conole & Dyke, 2004), and widening the pool of possible communication partners enormously. But the use of new technologies alone cannot ensure learning without a strong pedagogical rationale and appropriate integration with the course (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). Activities that take place using new technologies need to be ‘constructively aligned’ (Biggs, 1999) with the rest of the course and not presented as voluntary or optional, otherwise learners are unlikely to give them much attention (Kirkwood, 2008). It has been long accepted that learners “operate a cost-benefit analysis” (Lockwood, 1995:206) and allocate precious study time to the activities they perceive as having most value. Teachers are instrumental in shaping learners’ perceptions (McPherson & Nunes, 2004), so the way in which teachers present and use the different components and tools of a course will greatly influence learners’ perceptions of how important and useful these components and tools are.

A strong claim for the use of CMC and new technologies in online language learning is that it enables learners to interact with and receive feedback from not only their teacher but also other learners. However, in a discussion on ‘educational technologies in the age of social media’, Goodfellow reports that “[t]he supposed benefits of online interaction are just not obvious to many learners” (Goodfellow, 2007:6).

There is no doubt that new technologies, including synchronous and asynchronous conferencing tools, provide invaluable opportunities for language learners to practice the language, but the key challenge is how to enable learners and teachers to make the most of these tools, and support them as they acquire the necessary literacies and skills. Online

language teachers need different skills from their classroom-based colleagues but also from online teachers of other subjects. Developing the right skills is crucial because “online language courses, especially at lower levels, need to focus on the form of the interaction as well as the content” (Hampel & Stickler, 2005:312). This means handling technical knowledge, classroom management issues or learner anxiety, for example, alongside the cognitive demands placed on both the teacher and the learners by the use of the foreign language (Lewis, 2006). Hampel and Stickler proposed this skills pyramid (see Figure 1) as an illustration of the skills that online language teachers need.

<insert File Figure 1 Hampel and Stickler skills pyramid>

Figure 1: Skills pyramid (Hampel & Stickler, 2005:317)

It is critical to remember that developing these skills is but one dimension of the journey that teachers undertake to become effective online teachers. Alongside the process of skills development, and enabling it, there needs to be substantial work on developing pedagogical understanding of the affordances of the online medium and acceptance of the transformation required in how teachers perform their role.

Another consideration might be that, whereas in the past online teachers might have voluntarily opted for this medium on the basis of their interest in technology and willingness to develop online teaching skills (Hampel & Stickler, 2005), nowadays more and more teachers are required to teach online as increasing numbers of institutions move

towards blended learning models. For those who undertake this reluctantly and without having much interest in online learning, it is crucial that an effective training system is in place to prepare them for their new role.

Ideally, the introduction of changes and innovations (such as online teaching and learning) should be gradual, well supported and well integrated with the rest of the course to allow teachers and learners to make effective use of the new technologies and tools without feeling overwhelmed. Teachers need to be trained to become confident users and effective supporters of their students, and both teachers and learners alike need to know not only *how* to use new technologies but also *why* they should use them (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). This is part of their pedagogical understanding of the medium and goes beyond the practicalities of how to use different tools.

To this end, both the teachers and the institution need to make a great investment in terms of time, effort and commitment to provide adequate training for teachers, and to ensure a high level of competence, pedagogical understanding and teaching effectiveness. A good model is described in Ernest and Hopkins (2006), who acknowledge that “delivering online language courses is extremely labour intensive” and that they spend “more time on teacher support and development than on any other area” (p. 555). Their training model is very comprehensive and includes: reference documents; face to face meetings for new and continuing teachers; ‘just-in-time’ support via emails copied to a distribution list of new teachers; classroom observations and feedback from co-ordinators, based on a checklist of appropriate teaching behaviours that are expected from teachers; discussions



of pedagogical issues in the online staff room, also used for peer support, news, tips, etc.; and an open door policy to facilitate online peer observation amongst teachers.

A “one size fits all” approach to professional development is unlikely to succeed when teachers’ backgrounds in online learning range from experts to novices, therefore personalised support from a mentor often works better than general training sessions. The effectiveness of training will be undermined if it is not compulsory or remunerated and if attendance is erratic (Robinson, 1998). There is also a tension, particularly in the case presented here and also mentioned in Ernest and Hopkins (2006), to reconcile the provision of adequate training with the amount of time that part-time teachers are prepared to invest in training for a job that often accounts only for a small proportion of their income. According to Hampel and Stickler (2005: 324) the onus is on the institution to disseminate best practice and research and provide appropriate training, but this still requires the cooperation of teachers. Tait (2002) proposes to make professional development activities attractive to part-timers by adopting creative solutions, and involving them in the design, delivery and evaluation of such activities, a solution that has the added advantage of promoting the desired deeper understanding.

## **1.2. Theoretical considerations: teachers’ identity and self in online teaching and learning**

The impact of even the most effective training will vary across individual teachers.

Rather than looking at external barriers and incentives for engaging with training (such as

time, remuneration or quality of provision), White and Ding (2009) and Kubanyiova (2009) believe that 'the ideal teacher self perspective offers a paradigm for understanding how experienced language teachers engage with a new learning and teaching domain, and the ways in which they create, contribute to or resist opportunities for workplace learning' (White & Ding, 2009:346). According to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009), individual motivation is underpinned by a number of possible selves: an intrinsic Ideal Self, and extrinsically constrained Ought-To Self and a Feared Self with negative consequences.

In White and Ding's (2009) study, the subject had a clear notion of her ideal distance language teacher self, and overcame anxieties about the technology by seeing it as an instrument to help her attain this ideal. In contrast, the key self-concepts and values of Kubanyiova's (2009) subjects, trainee EFL teachers in Slovakia, highlighted career building through recognition, respect, appreciation and authority rather than facilitating student-centred learning. Hence, a training programme aimed at creating motivating classroom environments and promoting learner autonomy was ill-matched to their core values and professional identities, and their engagement was at best extrinsically motivated (the Ought-to Self). At worst, their existing teachers' identities might be threatened by the training outcomes, inducing resistance from the trainees. Kubanyiova concludes that effective training must both destabilise teachers' existing views of their role and identity and support them in building new perspectives which match the training outcomes – what Wenger (1998) calls 'learning as becoming'.

Hager and Hodkinson (2009) view learning as a 'changing relational web' which 'changes both the learner and the context' (p. 631) in ways which are 'practical, physical and emotional, as well as cognitive' (p.633). Thus the learning process entails an element of identity formation as the learner engages with the process in order to become 'a certain person or to avoid becoming a certain person' (Wenger, 1998:215). Hager and Hodkinson's view expands on two current conceptualisations of learning. Firstly, 'learning as participation in human practices', which emphasises the social aspect of learning and sees learning as a result of participation in 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Identities are also part of the learning process as 'the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities' (Wenger, 1998:149). Secondly, 'learning as transformation or reconstruction of the learner and their environment', encompassing constructivism -learners construct their learning by reconstructing their existing understanding-, and Engeström's activity theory, which proposes that the whole activity system, of which the learner is one part, changes as a result of the learning process, and that the learner changes with it. Hager and Hodkinson's understandings conflict with the widely accepted transmission model of learning, underpinned by an official discourse which sees training as the acquisition of generic knowledge, skills and competences regardless of context or individual beliefs. Ernest & Hopkins (2006: 551) adopt a similar socio-cultural perspective in relation to training for online teaching, which in their view needs to encompass awareness raising, teacher reflection and construction of knowledge about new pedagogical approaches, and the fostering of a sense of community. Professional training which seeks to address trainees' identities and support them in internalising learning must also take into account

their individual dispositions, goals and life histories (Billet, 2001; Billet and Somerville, 2004).

## **2 Teachers' perceptions of online teaching and learning in the evaluation of a blended learning course**

### **2.1 Context**

The data here presented comes from a qualitative study that evaluated teachers' experiences following the introduction of a blended learning model for distance language learning courses at The Open University, UK.

#### **2.1.1 The course**

The teachers in the study were all employed to support an intermediate Spanish course which had been delivered for eight years, initially offered with face to face teaching support and then for the last three years offered with a choice of face-to-face or online teaching support. About two thirds of students opted for face-to-face lessons whilst one third preferred the online version. However, with the institutional decision to adopt a blended approach for all its language courses, all tutorial support became a combination of face-to-face sessions, synchronous online lessons and asynchronous online activities moderated by the teacher. Some of the online asynchronous activities took place in an

online forum, and learners were encouraged to publish some of their written work in a personal blog.

Three different forums were available: a general course forum where students could socialise, support each other and contact the course leader; a teacher forum, which had the same function but was restricted to teachers; and tutor group forums where each teacher and their group of 20 students could communicate and carry out online revision tasks. These online revision tasks were not compulsory but were designed as an opportunity for students to interact with others in the foreign language, practising what they had learnt and receiving formative feedback from the teacher on their (mostly written) language production in a non-assessed context.

#### 2.1.2 Impact on teachers

Before the adoption of a blended learning policy for all language courses, teachers had had the choice of teaching the face-to-face or the online version of this course, or both. With the new blended approach, however, all teachers had to engage with all three types of teaching: face-to-face, online synchronous and online asynchronous. Blended tuition offers students the advantages of both face-to-face and online tutorials, and the option to attend either or both; but teachers were more constrained; those who had no experience of online teaching faced a steep learning curve.

#### 2.1.3 Training and support provided

A further challenge for teachers and students was the introduction of a brand-new electronic system of assignment submission and a digital audio recording tool.

Compulsory training in the use of the former was made available to all teachers but, as this was organised regionally, the format and quality of the provision was variable. In most cases it consisted of a single hands-on session, a reference manual and, in some regions, access to peer supporters who extended individualised help during the course.

The compulsory training provided for teachers who had no experience of online teaching consisted of two hands-on sessions in which they worked with a trainer to understand the online audio-conferencing tool from the students' point of view in the first session, and by briefly attempting the role of teachers in the second session. A more comprehensive voluntary training programme involving a series of online meetings and a support forum was also available. Teachers who were new to online teaching were strongly encouraged to attend and in spite of this additional training being unpaid, their uptake was very positive.

Interestingly, the opposite trend was observed in relation to the provision of an e-moderation course, consisting of a series of asynchronous tasks carried out in forums. Also advertised on a voluntary, unpaid basis, the course was completed by a minority of teachers, whose feedback was nonetheless very appreciative.

Teachers were supported by the institutions' technical helpdesk, a technically competent peer and the course director, who answered technical questions on each course's teacher forum, and, in some regions, by a regionally-based ICT mentor or mentoring team.

## **2.2 Methodology**

This mainly qualitative study emerged from issues identified by the researcher through participant observation<sup>1</sup>. The researcher's interest revolved around understanding the experiences and views of the teachers involved in the delivery of this course rather than in establishing any causal relationships or making any predictions.

A survey was designed to see whether these issues originally identified coincided with the teachers' main concerns. The survey<sup>2</sup> was first piloted with a small number of colleagues, before being emailed to the whole cohort of teachers on the course, achieving a good response rate of 49% (n=20). Closed questionnaire items addressed background information and views on the course, on working in an online environment, on student participation, on online teaching, and on technical problems encountered. Open ended questions allowed teachers to convey their views and suggestions on the course.

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<sup>1</sup> The author taught this course from 1999 to 2009, both in its face to face and online versions, and during the first year of the implementation of blended support. From 2007 she was also a member of the team of course developers who wrote the new version.

<sup>2</sup> Survey results are available at:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=VSys\\_2b9s4XXGNkRPZqtK8v9GFRSHhqC0SGJVwLhqbSWM\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=VSys_2b9s4XXGNkRPZqtK8v9GFRSHhqC0SGJVwLhqbSWM_3d)

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered were subjected to a preliminary analysis by the researcher, and the themes identified formed the basis for three semi-structured interviews. Selection of interviewees followed a quota sampling method based on previous experience of online teaching and degree of engagement with online learning (subjectively measured by the researcher in her interactions with the three selected teachers).

The researcher analysed the data from the interviews using a method of recursive abstraction in order to identify recurrent themes. This method was deemed appropriate as the volume of data was relatively small and the researcher had carried out the interviews herself. The researcher was aware that her several roles as researcher, fellow teacher and member of the academic course developing team could have an impact on the interviews and subsequent analysis of the data, but she felt that the insights she gained by having these three perspectives amply compensated for any possible bias they could introduce into the interviewing process.

The themes identified by the researcher as a participant observer were triangulated with the data from the survey and the semi-structured interviews, and later with the report of a separate online debriefing session chaired by the course director and attended by 20 of the 41 teachers in the course which addressed similar issues.

The following section looks at the findings of the study, drawn largely from the survey and interviews and corroborated by the data in the debriefing report. It discusses the main



concerns raised by teachers, some of the preliminary conclusions reached by the researcher and the resulting actions taken by the institution.

### **2.3 Main findings: technical issues, lack of integration and lack of time**

Most of the teachers who completed the survey had been working for the institution for more than 3 years, half of them (12) teaching courses with face to face support. Nearly all respondents had attended the compulsory training to use the audio-graphic tool for synchronous online teaching and the great majority (18 out of 20) felt confident using it. Conversely, only half of the respondents (11 out of 20) had taken part in training to use the new online asynchronous tools, and only 5 had done the e-moderation course. Although most respondents (16 out of 20) reported that they felt sufficiently prepared to teach a course that made use of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) tools such as forums and blogs, the reality was that most teachers only posted messages on their tutor forum monthly (8 out of 20) or less frequently (9 out of 20). Only one teacher had created her own blog, and only two teachers had encouraged their students to keep a blog.

Teachers' opinions on the usefulness of the various online tools seem to vary according to the function these tools performed. Tools whose main function was peer support or information transmission scored highly (14 out of 20 respondents found the online course calendar useful and 18 found the teacher forum useful, with 14 having posted contributions on it), whilst tools with a more pedagogic function were less popular (only 9 respondents found the tutor group forum where the revision tasks took place useful,

only 6 found those revision tasks useful, and only 1 found the blogs useful). This preference for a limited one-directional use of the online environment is not exclusive to the teachers in this study and has already been reported in the literature (Crook & Cluley, 2009).

There were frequent reports of problems with the technology which could not be attributed only to the fact that many respondents were new to online teaching. Issues of robustness and reliability of the tools were recorded by all teachers irrespective of their level of experience with online teaching. Three quarters of respondents experienced technical problems, which affected mainly the audio-graphic conferencing system (mentioned by 14 respondents), the electronic assignment submission system (mentioned by 8) and the audio recording tool (mentioned by 7). Regarding the concerns about the audio-graphic conferencing system, which the debriefing report states had been ‘a major problem for teachers and students’, it is noted in the same document that teachers welcomed the institution’s announcement of its replacement within one year.

Besides the technical issues, the themes that emerged strongly from the survey’s open-ended questions and the interviews, and were corroborated by the data in the debriefing report, were lack of integration and lack of time, particularly in relation to the online tools that teachers perceived to be less useful (tutor group forums for revision tasks and blogs mainly).

### **2.3.1 Integration**

Teachers felt that the new online tools were poorly integrated with the course as the activities that were carried out in blogs and forums were not linked to assessment and were therefore perceived as optional. The notion that elements of a course which are not compulsory, and therefore seen as peripheral, will not be used by many learners (Kirkwood, 2008) is borne out by the following statistics obtained from the VLE. Participation rate in the online revision tasks was low with only 18% of students attempting the first revision task, and only 3.6% completing the fifth and last one (see Figure 2 below). A similar picture emerged from participation rates in blog activities, with 16% of students starting a blog at the beginning of the course but less than 2% regularly posting to their blog towards the end of the course.

<insert Figure 2 Student participation in online revision tasks>

Figure 2. Student participation in online revision tasks

The decreasing participation pattern is in keeping with Rosewell's data on participation in online forums at the same institution (Rosewell, 2009), and with claims in the literature about how distance learners organise and prioritise their learning (Lockwood, 1995; Kirkwood, 2003). However, the learning benefits derived by the minority who engaged with the tasks must not be overlooked. The small community of bloggers, for example, were very committed to updating their blogs and the amount of writing practice this entailed is very likely to have had a positive impact on their language production. Equally

not to be disregarded are the benefits in terms of reading practice, new vocabulary, etc. to passive participants<sup>3</sup> who read those blogs.

Most teachers who completed the survey found the blogs ‘unnecessary’ or ‘not useful’ and felt they were not an important part of the course. As one respondent put it, “students and tutors need a reason to use a blog”. It was clear that the majority of teachers and learners had not been made aware of the advantages of using blogs for language learning, so they were understandably uninterested in using them. However, in view of the fact that there were some excellent instances of student blogs and a small community of students keen to use this tool, the decision reported in the debriefing report was to keep blogs for at least another year.

Teachers’ engagement with the online revision tasks was uneven: several failed to post the task instructions to the forum, or did not reply or provide any feedback to those students who posted contributions. This lack of teacher response affected a quarter of the students who completed the first online revision task, and would no doubt have contributed to their lack of motivation for engaging with subsequent online revision tasks.

Low participation in the voluntary and unpaid e-moderation course (6 of 20 respondents) might have contributed to their poor understanding of the pedagogical function of online

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<sup>3</sup> In Mason’s ‘rule of thirds’ (see Mason, 1989), she suggests that in online learning communities a third of participants contribute often, a third only occasionally and a third not at all, although they may still read other people’s contributions. She calls this last category ‘lurkers’ and suggests that they may still derive some benefit from this low profile form of participation.

tasks and blog activities, and of their own role in facilitating learning through them. This situation seems to confirm Salmon's point that "any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator support and training, otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meagre and unsuccessful" (Salmon, 2003:80)

### **2.3.2 Time**

The second theme that strongly came out of teachers' comments in the open-ended questions of the survey, in the three interviews and in the debriefing report, was lack of time, a feeling that learning was too distributed, that there were too many places to check and contribute to and that the course was too 'cluttered'. Teachers' comments in the survey strongly reflected this, with some teachers feeling resentful about what they perceived as an addition to their workload, "I work part time (...) I have a life outside (...) and other professional commitments. I merely found this irritating". Others questioned what the focus of their role should be: "It has been a year to learn too many things and to do too many things (...) and for me the most important thing are students and I feel that I should spend the time with them, encouraging and helping them to learn the language".

## **3. Discussion**

The unusual number of changes affecting this course meant that teachers found themselves having to learn too many things at once. In this situation they probably focused on getting to grips with online synchronous conferencing because, within the online medium, that was the closest to face-to-face teaching, which is one of the central activities on which most base their identity as teachers. Online asynchronous tools were neglected because teachers were possibly not made adequately aware that online teaching through asynchronous tools could also be a central part of their jobs as teachers, just a different way of performing their role. The issue that needs to be unravelled is whether time pressures on teachers and poor integration of the tasks with the rest of the course were the main factors in some teachers' limited success in engaging with online tools, as repeatedly mentioned in the data collection tools, or whether there were other factors that contributed to this situation.

The first tenet of this paper is that the potential of online asynchronous tools to facilitate learning, particularly in a distance learning context as the one discussed here, was poorly understood by the teachers in this course. Poor understanding of the tools and their affordances was shown by the teacher who did not encourage her students to use the blog because she thought it would be better for them to 'organise their notes/grammar in whichever way they found best'; or by the teacher who felt the blog was 'a good tool to keep in touch'.

Partly this might originate from the commonly held view amongst some teachers (and learners) which this comment from the survey neatly encapsulates: "I am not convinced

about the pedagogic value of blogs and revision exercises that are not properly marked”. Believing that a task is only valuable if the teacher marks it ‘properly’ reflects a conception of language learning which focuses on accuracy rather than communication, and this is a real problem in language learning, where often the teacher is enshrined as the main source of ‘correct’ linguistic knowledge and learners worry about picking up each others’ mistakes if they read or listen to the language produced by their peers. In the same way that Goodfellow points out that “[t]he supposed benefits of online interaction are just not obvious to many learners” (Goodfellow, 2007:6), this author feels that the same might be true of some teachers. For example, the survey respondent who thinks that ‘the face to face mode is much better as learning a language is a lot to do with social interaction and communication’ seems to imply that interaction and communication through online tools have less value for language learners than face to face exchanges. In a distance learning context where the online medium can bring together learners and teachers who are geographically dispersed and provide them with a space for interaction and communication, previously rarely achieved, it would be regrettable if this clearly useful affordance of the medium were undervalued.

It is possible that teachers, overwhelmed by familiarising themselves with a multiplicity of new technologies and tools in a very short space of time, focussed their efforts on the immediate problem of mastering the tools to the detriment of understanding the pedagogical possibilities of those tools. When one respondent mentioned that she wanted ‘more time in face to face contact and less in the use of technology’, her remark focussed on ‘*the use of technology*’ rather than ‘*teaching through technology*’.

A second tenet of this paper is that teachers' willingness to change is powerfully influenced by learners' expectations and traditional ideas shared by teachers and learners about what language learning is and what their respective roles in the process are. The most frequent comment made by teachers in the survey is that their students want more face-to-face lessons instead of online ones, although some teachers admit that once their students try online synchronous learning they tend to enjoy it. In the case of online asynchronous tools, teachers just report that very few of their students completed these tasks. This is probably a fairly accurate depiction of student's preferences – after all, before the institutional decision to move to blended learning, the version of the course with face to face support had attracted twice as many students as its online counterpart. In any case, whether the students' expectations were real or a reflection of what the teachers would have liked them to be, the fear that 'by adopting a new approach to teaching they would fail to meet the students' expectations' (Kubanyiova, 2009:326) could have been an inhibiting factor for these teachers to develop as online teachers, particularly as the pedagogical approach in the institution is strongly learner-centred. The debriefing report explains that the decision to remove asynchronous revision tasks from teachers' responsibilities in exchange for an increased number of contact hours (face to face or online) was met with 'cheers and overall approval' from the teachers taking part.

The third tenet of this paper is that the training offered to teachers in this course did not provide them with sufficient opportunities to deepen their understanding of the pedagogical possibilities of the online tools available or to construct their own personal



understanding of what online teaching was. Too often the training on offer was based on a transfer of knowledge and acquisition of skills approach which left teachers with a mountain to climb in terms of fully understanding and appropriating the new tools in their own teaching. Some survey respondents and participants in the debriefing session commented that the training sessions were ‘not enough’, ‘only useful as a very superficial introduction’, and that they ‘had to invest a lot of my private time’ or ‘struggled through the manual on my own’ in order to feel prepared to use the tools. The training was designed to teach them *how* to use the tools, but not *why* they should be using them, even though both aspects are equally important (Kirkwood & Price, 2005).

Acknowledging that training implies personal change as the new understandings transform the trainee, and supporting and guiding trainees (in this case the teachers) through the process, might have yielded better results. White and Ding (2009) regard ‘teacher self and teacher identity as the core of teacher learning, shaping and shaped by the actions teachers take, their dialogue and reflections’ (p. 347). A training approach that overlooks the importance of teacher self and teacher identity in the learning process is unlikely to be truly effective.

In practical terms this means that, over and above any financial or professional incentives which training offers, awareness raising and pedagogical understanding need to be prioritised when training teachers, particularly those who are not enthusiastic about online teaching. As Kubanyiova (2009) and White and Ding (2009) point out, the process will be much easier with those who already aspire to become online teachers, but for

those who do not see themselves as online teachers, the training has to persuade them of the value of online teaching and the desirability of becoming online teachers.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that even such a training approach will in some cases fail to achieve the deep learning that produces effective online teachers. The individual's dispositions (values, attitudes and beliefs) and the strength of internal and external motivators determine to some extent how each person engages with what is on offer. At a basic level, teachers who are new to online language teaching are generally very experienced at face-to-face teaching and the experiences and values they have developed as language teachers will shape how they approach the task of becoming online language teachers.

## **Conclusion**

In the training programme evaluated here, more effort was expended on the mechanics of the new technologies than on their value in the language learning process, and still less on helping teachers reconsider their professional identities as teachers in an online environment. Using synchronous and asynchronous tools to support language learning demands not just technical mastery of a suite of tools, but a reconceptualising of the roles of both teacher and learner, and of how they co-construct understanding through synchronous and asynchronous online interaction.

This paper has highlighted the centrality of the concepts of teacher identity and teacher self in determining the success or failure of training practices designed to guide teachers in their adoption of online technologies for language teaching. It has shown that training, particularly in the workplace and particularly when it is about technology, often focuses on knowledge and skills and neglects understanding and transformation of the learner. In other words, it is often about learning to teach online rather than learning to become an online teacher.

Increased understanding of all these issues is essential to design more effective training programmes for language teachers. In the present study, the institution has made great improvements to its provision of training for online language teachers. The backbone of this training is a longer, more comprehensive programme of synchronous and asynchronous sessions designed and delivered by fellow teachers with more advanced skills. This programme is offered at different levels and times throughout the year, and all teachers are encouraged to attend as part of their professional development. With fewer changes to cope with, teachers can now focus on improving their skills and understanding of online teaching and learning and, rather than being teachers who reluctantly use technology to comply with institutional requirements, they are supported in their journey to become online teachers for whom the technology opens up new pedagogical opportunities.

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